

Rolf Boldrewood, *Robbery Under Arms*. Edited by Paul Eggert & Elizabeth Webby. Academy Editions of Australian Literature. St Lucia: U Queensland P, 2006.

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In his 2002 *Overland* review of the first three Academy Editions of Australian Literature (on Kingsley, Richardson and Baxter), Brian Kiernan described the project as a series of “white elephants”. One of Kiernan’s major concerns was for whom are these editions produced? Who will buy them? And would the project be better served by a different model, such as the American Norton critical editions with their extensive samples of major criticism? I can’t disagree with Kiernan’s concern about the hefty price of the series; the cost of the paperback at \$80 makes it an impossible choice for the syllabus of an Australian literature subject at the tertiary or secondary level. That the reach of the series will be limited to specialist readers, libraries and Australianist bibliophiles with discretionary income is disappointing. I do take issue with one of the implications of Kiernan’s review, however, namely his concern that the series is a waste of tax-payer funds. The Boldrewood volume and Academy editions project as a whole provides an invaluable addition to our national literary culture, and economic-rationalist thinking, though an unnerving reality, should not be the only indicator and arbiter of value. There are more ethically dubious, if not intellectually bankrupt, examples of governmental squandering of tax-payer funds than literary projects like this (which really should have been adequately publicly funded and completed years ago).

The latest volume of the Academy Editions of Australian Literature is overdue. Initially the project began in 1993, but it wasn’t until 1999 that the current editors took up the daunting task in earnest. The result is the first full-scale critical edition of *Robbery Under Arms*, a mammoth tome (or doorstep) of 743 pages including an extensive scholarly apparatus. As befits such a large intellectual endeavour, the project has been a collaboration between two esteemed scholars of Australian literature. Paul Eggert was the textual editor and wrote the introduction, chronology, and the appendix “*Robbery Under Arms* in Montreal”. Elizabeth Webby was responsible for the appendixes, “Historical Background” and “Adaptations”, and compiled most of the explanatory notes and the glossary on Australianisms, dialect words, slang and colloquialisms. In addition, Julieanne Lamond assisted Webby in her research and wrote the appendix, “Places in *Robbery Under Arms*”.

Through numerous versions and endless edits (not counting serialisations and translations)—Eggert informs us there have been eleven original type-settings of the novel—*Robbery Under Arms* has become a highly unstable text. In order to address such textual instability, Eggert and Webby turn to the first serialisation of the novel in the *Sydney Mail* (1882-83). This differs from Alan Brissenden's facsimile of the 1893 Macmillan version for UQP's Australian Author series, which was first published in 1979 and widely used within Australian literature subjects (no doubt helped by its affordability). What makes this new volume invaluable to both the scholar and general reader of colonial fiction is the extra 29,000 words cut from various versions of the novel. Such editorial cutting makes the novel comparable to Marcus Clarke's infamous edit of *His Natural Life* (1870). With the reintroduction of large slabs of prose and whole chapters, the twenty-first-century reader can now have access to an unabridged version of this foundational Australian text. But, the questions remains: what has been returned to the novel? And perhaps more importantly, what effects does this material have on our reading or rereading of Boldrewood's classic?

Robbery under Arms is traditionally noted by critics for being the first novel narrated from the first-person viewpoint of an uneducated Australian bushman. Boldrewood's use of Australian colloquialisms and speech patterns was groundbreaking for the 1880s and inspired such writers as Henry Lawson. This critical interest in returning the "voice" to the novel—what Eggert terms the "novel's oral literacy"—is one of the major motivations informing the editorship. For example, the *Sydney Mail* serial captures the vernacular speech patterns not only of the narrator Dick Marston, but also personae such as the indigenous character, Warrigal, and the charismatic bushranger Captain Starlight. This inclusion of various colonial voices extends to local newspapers, Chinese workers, different classes, races, genders and occupations present in late nineteenth-century Australia. In this respect, Boldrewood's novel serves as an important precursor to Joseph Furphy's use of Australian vernacular and multiple colonial voices in his classic novel *Such is Life* (1903), which is also set in the Riverina. Furthermore, this return of the novel's oral literacy and playful use of Australian colloquialisms highlights the type of generic modifications the colonial romance novel underwent in the Australian colonies in the hands of writers like Boldrewood; changes that make the novel a very different type of text when compared to its predecessors, notably the gentrified atmosphere and imperial tone of Henry Kingsley's foundational colonial romance *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn* (1859).

Among the chunks of narrative returned to this unabridged version of the novel, we get access to some of Boldrewood's female characters. There is Mrs

Marston's woe and sister Aileen's equally aching heart, and the heroic actions of Mrs Hamilton "a brave lady [. . .] as good as two men", who joins her husband in the battle against the bushranger Moran to defend their property and life at Kadombla. Other passages reveal the multicultural nature of Boldrewood's world in the Riverina with the inclusion of Chinese characters. In one of the excised stories, Ah Mow successfully seeks justice for his fellow countrymen after being attacked and robbed by "half-bred duffers". Other scenes return crucial information regarding the motivations of characters' actions; most notable, as Eggert highlights in the introduction, is Ben Marston's class conscious oath: "I swore an oath when I left England that I'd make it hot for the cursed gentfolk that hunted me down". In another returned passage Dick Marston ruminates on the connections between illiteracy, religious instruction and crime, advocating a form of universal education: "Men and women that can't read and search about and think for themselves are more likely to get some sort of religion that'll keep 'em out of harm's way, at any rate, than those that's had their religion drilled into them, and know nothing else."

The excised passages also highlight the rich intertextuality of Boldrewood's text, the ways in which he read and incorporated local stories and events from newspapers in the Riverina. A more crucial source for such information, however, was his occupation as a magistrate. This technique, though not unique to Boldrewood, does give us access to an interesting array of colonial voices and discourses normally suppressed. In turn, the reporting of the Marstons and Captain Starlight in the colonial press is juxtaposed with their own narrative of events, which creates discrepancies between official and subjugated knowledges. The contextualising of other bushranging stories within Boldrewood's novel creates interesting contrasts to the "goodness" of the Marstons—or at the very least their own version of being benevolent outlaws—with "blood thirsty" and "brutal" bushrangers like Moran (based on the infamous "mad dog" Morgan). This binary has always been present in various versions of the novel, but these excised passages further highlight the significance of such a binary to the narrative structure.

For the first time scholars have access to the little known *Echo* serialisation of 1884. This second colonial version of Boldrewood's text predates the first English version and fills gaps in the novel's textual and editorial history. One of the highlights of the extra-textual material is Eggert's account of the French-Canadian *Montreal Daily Star* serialisation of *Robbery Under Arms* in 1902. This raises new research avenues into the place of Australian literature in an imperial context. Intriguing comparative projects come to mind such as how Boldrewood's novel was received by French-Canadians in the early 1900s compared to German readers of the Tauchnitz edition of 1889.

Even though the Academy Edition of Boldrewood's novel is a valuable addition to Australian literary studies, and the painstaking and erudite work of the editors and contributors can only be lauded, one does need to question whether the Academy Editions would be better served by adopting the Norton Critical Editions model, especially their "Criticism" sections which often range from contemporary perspectives to the most current critical theory. This is covered somewhat in Eggert's introduction, but is generally reduced to footnotes. A separate select bibliography of important criticism would have been useful. But, with the series nearing completion, perhaps a more useful approach is to campaign for a companion series that collects significant criticism on such canonical Australian texts. I can almost hear the collective groan of unenthusiastic publishers. Harking back to Kiernan's question—who buys these things?—I have noticed that my bookcases, over the last few years, have become studded with the invaluable presence of bulging white elephants.

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